

Quote: “This is rather interesting in that sometime before the fire, I was wondering what the heck I was going to do with all the stuff we had in our house. I needed to get rid of a lot of things and that was solved. I got rid of everything.”

Vernon C. Howell, formerly of rural Clark County, was ninety and a half years old at the time of the interview. He spent his life farming and ranching, and was a professional geologist for the oil field.

Diana: So when did you first become aware of the Starbuck Fire, which we’ll just call “the fire” that happened on March 6, 2017?

Vernon: Sometime in the afternoon of the 6th. I can’t tell you the time that I first heard of it.

Diana: Did somebody tell you?

Vernon: That part, I can’t remember. I don’t even know when it started. It could be that I was at the senior center and got word of it.

Diana: So did you come to town that day and work at the senior center and have lunch?

Vernon: Yes.

Diana: Then you returned home?

Vernon: Yes.

Diana: What was your immediate reaction to the fire close to your house?

Vernon: The fire close to my house was panic. It came from the north after the wind changed. I had been up around Mount Jesus watching both fires. When I first went up to Mount Jesus, the fire northwest was just one plume. I watched it grow to several miles going northeast and I could tell it started around the state lake. Then it turned out it was north of the state lake. Then I quit worrying about it, because it looked like it was going to Kingsdown or somewhere. I came back down closer to my house watching for the fire coming from Beaver towards Ashland. Of course, the smoke was pretty bad and you could not see any fire, just smoke. It was real smoky anyway, then suddenly the wind changed and this big, awful glob of black smoke came and I was about a mile from home. I hurried home and I left my car running and ran in the house. I got my checkbook that was lying on the kitchen table and grabbed a coat. I started out and I remembered there was some money in the bedroom. I ran in there and got it and I was going to the car. I found out I could still run! I glanced over my left shoulder and I could see flames behind me.

I hopped in my car and we went down my driveway to the county road. When I turned east, I looked back and the flames were right at the house at that time. I headed towards K34 and from Frank York's land east of me, I had wheat all the way to protect me from then on. As I was going there was an ember which came over and started a fire in the ditch on the road ahead of me.

Diana: So how fast was the wind blowing?

Vernon: Real, is all I could tell you. But when they said, "60 miles an hour," I believe that. It came so fast and it was really dark. It was hard to see the road, the smoke was so bad.

Diana: So when you got to 34, did you turn north or south?

Vernon: No, I went south to the Sitka Corner and people were gathering there. Then we kind of decided where to go. The fire getting close to there on the east side of the road and I decided to go to Buffalo. I was probably 20 minutes there until I could fill up with gas and they evacuated Buffalo. They said, "Go to Alva." I went over as far as the Coldwater road and went up to Coldwater.

Diana: Did you stay in Coldwater?

Vernon: I met Jane Rankin in Coldwater and we ended up eventually going and getting motel rooms in Greensburg and staying there all night.

Diana: So when did you return to Ashland?

Vernon: It was a little after noon the next day.

Diana: Did you have any trouble getting food or did you run into other people and find out something about what was going on?

Vernon: Well, at Coldwater, of course there were a lot of Ashland people. We kept hearing stories about whose house burned or whose didn't. I thought mine probably did. On the way to Greensburg, I told Jane, "If it burns, I hope it burns the whole darned thing." It did.

Diana: When you came back on Tuesday about noon, did you go by your house?

Vernon: No. Jane had already gone before I did to Coldwater, when they first evacuated Ashland. That night, we left my vehicle at the school in Coldwater; before we went to Greensburg we had to go by and pick it up. We actually ate breakfast at the motel, so we didn't have to worry about that. We stopped at the Dollar Store in Coldwater and picked up

some clothes like shorts and T-shirts and socks, that kind of stuff. Luckily, I did need them!

Diana: Because you just left with a coat and your billfold, right? Money. You didn't have time to get anything else.

Vernon: No. If I had, I wouldn't have made it.

Diana: Then when you returned to town, where did you go? Did you go to Jane's?

Vernon: Yes, we were in two vehicles then and we went to Jane's and got her camera. Then we came back out and that's when I took these pictures. So it was sometime in early afternoon.

Diana: Did you lose any other buildings besides your house?

Vernon: I lost a chicken house and a little shed that was right near the house.

Diana: So how did you feel when you saw the house wasn't there?

Vernon: I think I was relieved in one way, that I had gotten out and I was glad to see that it burned it all up and we didn't have to go through and try to salvage anything. There was nothing worth salvaging.

Diana: Everything was gone.

Vernon: Everything was gone. Anything with any wood on it, burned. We had an old well house that had a real nice shake-shingle roof on. Of course it burned it off. It burned the lid of where our water well was. It had a wooden lid and it burned. It burned the power pole down so there wasn't any electricity there. It got everything right around the house.

Diana: So this was where this flame is in this one picture. You said it was propane. So it burned the rest of the propane that was in the tank?

Vernon: Yes.

Diana: Did that take a while?

Vernon: We don't know. It was burning when we left and when we came back the next day, it was gone.

Diana: Did you lose any vehicles or tractors?

Vernon: I lost a Ford tractor, a real nice riding mower. One thing it did, I had an old trailer house, a 50 foot thing I used as a shop. It had a lot of tools and a lot of different things in there. It burned it up, but we salvaged some of the tools out of it. Adjacent to it was a car port, one of those metal car ports. Half of it folded over and under it was my riding lawn mower. It devoured it

and the Ford tractor was near there and it got it. I had a stock trailer that looked like it made it, but I opened the door and the floor was burned out of it, but the tires were still up! Mike Harden had a swather there it burned under it, but he couldn't find anything damaged. Actually later on when he went to move it, there was some damage to the tires, but they were still up.

Diana: What about your pickup?

Vernon: My pickup was saved. It survived. It was sitting in some tracks that were worn down and there wasn't any grass right there. It burned within six inches of it, but it started right off, thank goodness. There was something plastic in the seat that melted; I don't know what it was.

Diana: So all the glass and everything, the windshields and everything were just fine?

Vernon: Yes.

Diana: You don't have a house, so where did you go to live?

Vernon: I was fortunate enough to be able to stay in my brother Don's house. He died two and a half years ago and his wife went to live with a son down in Mesa, Arizona. Their daughter lives in Georgia, so they suggested I live in the house. I am

still there. I'm very fortunate, it is totally furnished. It worked out pretty good for me.

Diana: So what are some things you lost in the fire that you really miss?

Vernon: You know, there are so many things. Initially, what I thought of was pictures. Then I lost all my records, and I was waiting for one set of stuff to come from some investments so I had all my tax stuff ready to go into Konrade, the accountant. The investment records didn't get burned, thankfully, but it burned all my other records and I've had trouble getting 1099's and things like that. I had to contact people to get that. I can think of tons of things. I had quite a rock collection, of course that's all gone. There were a lot of things that meant a lot, art work, oil paintings and water colors that were original that burned up.

One of the fortunate things was our daughter Gail came and spent several days digging around. We had a half basement in the house, and the part where our bedroom was and where the jewelry was, was not over the half-basement. So she knew right where that was. She dug around in there and found her mother's wedding ring. One of her grandmother's diamond rings and one of her great-grandmother's gold rings.

Diana: That's pretty impressive. So you talked about your kids, how did you tell them? Were you in contact with them during the fire or after the fire? Did you call them and say, "I'm fine. I'm out."

Vernon: We were on the way to Greensburg, Jane and I were, the night of the fire. Gail called me on my cell phone. She had heard on Facebook that we'd had a fire. So she called me to find out about it; I was able to tell her that I was safe but the house probably burned. Then she informed everybody else.

Diana: When did she come? Did she come Tuesday?

Vernon: She didn't come until over a month later but she informed everybody. She got pictures from Facebook and that kind of stuff and sent them to my sons Andy and Tim and other relatives.

Diana: Have you ever been involved in a wildfire before?

Vernon: Nobody had been in a fire like that. No.

Diana: Have you ever fought fire before?

Vernon: Yes, I have.

Diana: Yes, this was an extraordinary one. But what kind had you done in the past?

Vernon: Oh, I'd just helped when there was one. I'd gone along and make sure the fires were out. I'd carry a wet gunny sack.

Diana: Have any fires come close to your house before?

Vernon: Six years earlier, we had one within a quarter of a mile. It was a lightning fire up in Miller's pasture northeast of my house. They had a northeast wind and it came and burned 6,000 acres. It had three runners that went out, so it burned in three different tracks all the way to the Lake Road north of Ashland. I didn't lose any cattle, but lost a lot of fence and grass in that fire.

Diana: So did you lose a lot of cattle and fence this time?

Vernon: No, I do not have any cattle. I take in cattle and it wasn't time for the cattle to get here. My horse and dog had both died a couple years before, so all I had to look out for was me.

Diana: A good thing! So did you lose a lot of fence?

Vernon: I sure did. The most of it up there was three miles between me and the Miller Ranch. It still isn't fixed yet; we're waiting for people to work there.

Diana: Do you have some pasture

land elsewhere in the county that burned?

Vernon: Yes, the home place south of Ashland. I lost about 1,100 acres of grass.

Diana: Is it coming back?

Vernon: Yes, it is. We fortunately had rain right after the fire and it came back pretty good. It dried up again now.

Diana: What is your vivid memory of the fire? What is the thing that you just can't forget?

Vernon: There's two things. When I was watching the fire coming from Beaver, and I was south of the compressor station and this mass of black smoke came from the north fire when the wind changed and that front moved in. It came in so fast with that 60 mile an hour wind; it was totally unexpected. I was watching the southwest, not the north. Then it hit. That and probably when I turned onto the county road a quarter mile from the house and saw where the flames were about to hit the house.

Diana: Was it black smoke at your house then too?

Vernon: I can't even remember that. I absolutely can't remember. I remember driving toward K34 on the county road and it was kind of tough

to see.

Diana: Like driving in fog?

Vernon: Yes, very similar. It sure was.

Diana: You said you met up with some people at the Sitka Junction. Who was there? Do you remember?

Vernon: Mary Kaltenbach was the first one. She parked right beside me and she had one of her little grandkids. She thought her house got burned; it turns out it didn't. She was kind of waiting to hear from Mark. Several people drove up that I didn't know. I didn't pay any attention to who they were, but John Humphreys wondered what I thought about which way we ought to go. When we saw that the fire was getting close, coming down the east side of K34, we decided Buffalo was the direction to go and we did.

Diana: Do you have any concept of what time it was?

Vernon: Sometime in there it was 5:30 is the only thing I can remember. I remember when we left Coldwater to go to Greensburg, it was about 8:30. But it was almost like night the rest of the time because of the smoke.

Diana: When you were over at

Coldwater, could you see fire? Or could you just see smoke?

Vernon: I never saw any fire other than that right at my house. That was the only fire I saw any time.

Diana: When you went down into Oklahoma, you didn't see any fires burning down that way?

Vernon: I didn't see any. The smoke was so bad you just couldn't see.

Diana: So what were some of the people or agencies that proved most helpful?

Vernon: My insurance company was one. Very helpful.

Diana: Didn't give you any trouble about things?

Vernon: No, everything was a plus. The Ashland Community Foundation helped an awful lot.

Diana: Did you take meals down at the camp? Did you go to the Christian Camp and eat?

Vernon: No.

Diana: Was the community center serving lunches every day? Were you working?

Vernon: Yes, we had our regular meals.

Diana: Can you perceive of anything

positive that has come from this fire?

Vernon: This is rather interesting in that sometime before the fire, I was wondering what the heck I was going to do with all the stuff we had in our house. I needed to get rid of a lot of things and that was solved. I got rid of everything.

Diana: Any other good things that came from the fire? Did you have any volunteers come out and help at your place?

Vernon: Yes, there was a group that came from Texas and they came up and helped tear out some fence down south between the Rankins and the Howells down there. They tore out a couple miles of fence and the Mennonites tore out some fence for me northeast of town. They did a very good job and we were very pleased.

Diana: Did you have any cleanup at your house?

Vernon: It has not been done yet.

Diana: But there is going to have to be some cleanup?

Vernon: A lot.

Diana: What could be done? What could people do to prepare for a future fire? What sticks in your mind that maybe you should have done?

Vernon: I can't think of a thing at my place because I was totally surrounded by grass. I was kind of at the mercy of Mother Nature.

Diana: Was there anything in your house that if you'd had time to get it, you would have taken?

Vernon: Actually, there were so many different things that I can think of that it would have been a terrible decision to have to make. I don't know what I would have taken, I really don't. You know, the one thing that I wish I would have taken and I didn't, was lying right there on a coffee table, all my income tax stuff! If I'd taken that, that would have been better than taking the \$70 I got out of the bedroom.

Diana: Life would have been a lot easier.

Vernon: It sure would have. That's one thing. I hadn't thought about that, but if I had grabbed that, it would have been easier than going back in the bedroom and getting money.

Diana: So what about the community. How could they prepare for a wildfire or any kind of disaster? How do you think the community responded to this fire?

Vernon: I think really well. I really

do. It was rather amazing how the whole country responded, this county and the surrounding counties too, like Harper County, Oklahoma and Comanche County. It is amazing to me, the generosity of people is totally amazing. The people from Maryland that had some trouble with fire, they sent out \$87,000 to us out here. Then nine or ten of them came out and visited us and got a tour of the country. I heard one guy say that when he got home he was going to hug his tree because he said, "You haven't got any trees here." It is amazing what everybody did and the amount of everything that came in. Money and hay and fencing materials and water. It really was.

Diana: Food and clothing.

Vernon: The pair of pants I have on now I got at the 4-H building.

Diana: Did you find a lot of things from the donations there?

Vernon: I got a few things, not a lot. There was so much stuff, I didn't even know what to think about. But I got some, T-shirts and some shorts and a few things. I got a pair of shoes that didn't fit right, work shoes. I was glad when I was finally able to go buy some that fit.

Diana: So how long did it take before you got to go somewhere to buy some?

Vernon: It wasn't very long. I think it was maybe the Wednesday after, we went to Dodge and started buying a few clothes and things. I just gradually got a few more.

Diana: So what do you think about town living?

Vernon: Well, I'd lived in a lot of towns so that wasn't that big of a deal. What I miss more than anything is I fed quail and deer and other critters in my back yard. I miss that. We'd had a wildlife camera and we found out we had a lot more critters than we knew. They would show up at night, coons and bobcats and skunks. But the wildlife, the deer and quail, one time I counted 36 quail out there after the ice storm in January. They were all trying to get a drink. I was taking water out there. We had quite a few deer come in, the same deer you know, and we got some good photos of them too. I miss that part. Now, I've got bird feeders here in town so I'm getting birds in the back yard now. I'm doing pretty good that way. I miss seeing. Where I live, I can't see very far. I'm so used to just looking out the window at home and I could see several miles in some directions. I miss that part, too. I don't miss the muddy roads, if we could ever get any.

Diana: Were there some landmarks

that you used to know very well that aren't there anymore? Things that you used to drive by?

Vernon: There's things that are so noticeable; all the cedar trees got burned. I had quite a few cedar trees real close to the house, I think three rows of them were about 100 yards long and three rows wide. Then southeast of the house, probably 200 yards of six rows of cedar trees. All the cedar trees got burned. That takes away from the looks of it out there. The one thing, I had four pecan trees that still have some life in them. I was glad for that.

Diana: Were there any houses close to you that burned?

Vernon: No. What we called the Chadwick house over on the Thielen place did not burn. The Martin house didn't burn and the Harold Dorsey house didn't burn. All of them were empty. Then there's some houses that did burn that people were in them.

Diana: It was kind of strange how that worked, wasn't it?

Vernon: Yes. There was a streak from Giles on down and all the way down to the old Thielen place, all the houses that burned in there. I think there were around ten.

Diana: Quite a bit. So most of those

houses were east of K34? Except for the Giles' houses?

Vernon: And Miller's and the house on the R.A. Dorsey place.

Diana: And the Fleetwood house, which was Mike Seacat's house.

Vernon: And the cabin on the Filson place. Then the house was empty up on the old Virgil Broadie place. It burned.

Diana: And then there was one on Steve Stevens, right?

Vernon: That I don't know.

Diana: Yes, a house that he and Margie lived in when they first came back. Do you have any other thoughts about this experience that stand out?

Vernon: The miles of fencing that people have had to do and still have to do is just unreal. The numbers of cattle that people lost.

Diana: So do you have any other thoughts that you'd like to share?

Vernon: I try not to dwell on the bad things. Really, I don't. You know, things happen every once in a while and there are some humorous things that happen. I remember when we first were looking around Don's and somebody had had this 8 track player. I told Jane, "My Gosh, I can

play my tapes!" She said, "Vernon, you don't have any tapes." That kind of thing.

Diana: When you first figured out that you could use Don's house, was that your first thought, "I can go to town." Or did you have to stop and think about having a place to go?

Vernon: That was a total relief, because I hadn't thought about it. I was wondering about buying a trailer house and living out there. I really hadn't thought about that, then they called and it was kind of like a miracle.

Diana: Nice to have that available. So did you have a lot of people come and ask what they could do for you or how they could help?

Vernon: Yes, a lot of people have asked to help.

Diana: You have friends from other places that have tried to get in contact with you much?

Vernon: No, not much that way. Every now and then I think about like when I was with the City Service Oil Company. I was with a uranium investigation group that went around. I had ore from five different uranium mines, some of them pretty famous out in Utah. I had that and then a geologist of ours found some sand down in the Padre

Islands. He took it back to the lab and found out was Titanium. They sent me when I was down in San Antonio to try to find the source of it. I started basically at the mouth of the Rio Grande River and followed it upstream almost to El Paso and every stream that came into the Rio Grande. I did find the source of it. I had some on my kitchen table that I don't have any more. Stuff like that.

Diana: Did you have any service medals that you earned?

Vernon: I sure did, from World War II.

Diana: Are you going to try to have them replaced?

Vernon: No, I don't think so. There were three of them that I can think of; one of them was for being in the Asiatic Pacific. That was one I really remember. Yes, those are gone.

Diana: Did you get any Purple Hearts?

Vernon: No, I didn't get hurt.

Diana: That's a good thing. Were you on a ship?

Vernon: I was only a passenger on a ship. I was fortunate that I was the last draft age of World War II. I went in February of '45 when I was in high school and joined the navy. I went in February of '45 and the war was over

in August of '45. Then is when I went over and spent some time in the Marshall Islands and Wake Island.

Diana: So how long were you in the service?

Vernon: I was only in 18 months. They didn't know what to do with us. They discharged us.

Diana: So did you come back and finish school?

Vernon: I went to college for a couple of years at K-State in the fall of '46 to the spring of '48. I laid out five years, got married and went back and got a degree in geology and then worked for an oil company for a number of years.

Diana: So when did you return to Ashland?

Vernon: In 1964.

Diana: Did you build that house?

Vernon: No, the house was built the year I was born in 1927.

Diana: Who owned it?

Vernon: Clarence Aldridge had it built. We ended up buying the place from the Aldridges.

Diana: So do you know how old it was at the time you bought it? The house.

Vernon: The same age as me. 1927. We were the same age; I lived longer than it did.

Diana: Which is a good thing! So do you have anything else that we haven't covered or anything you think should be part of this?

Vernon: Right off hand, I can't think of anything. It's purely humbling to lose everything you have, virtually, all your records and your pictures. I was fortunate in the pictures. My sister down in Amarillo had a lot of duplicates and I got a lot of those. Then her daughter came up and had pictures that if I wanted any, she'd have them copied. She did that; so I got a lot of pictures that way. Gail, my daughter, was here a year ago and copied a lot of pictures and she gave copies of those to me. So I ended up with quite a few pictures.

Diana: But you don't have your 8 track tapes.

Vernon: I sure don't. I had a lot of scuba diving tapes that I would have loved to have but I don't.